

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE ESSAY

Two historians using the same facts may come to two different interpretations of a historical event. Contemporary British and American views of the battles of Lexington and Concord would obviously differ because the two sides held different assumptions. Any two historians several years later also hold different assumptions, and produce different historical accounts. Decades later other historians declare that the previous historians only perceived part of the truth. Generation after generation rewrites history, and theoretically comes closer to the truth. In actuality each historian reflects his time. The study of changing historical interpretations, shifting emphasis, and different methodologies is called historiography.

Students in survey courses need to know some historiography, but should never sacrifice a firm grounding in the fundamental facts and concepts of American history for more depth in historiography. You run the risk of name-dropping in your writing, and of citing authoritative sources as a substitute for your own analysis. To explain the breakdown of the federal political system in the 1850s is better than to state, "Craven blames the coming of the Civil War on the breakdown of the political system." How? When? Where? As shown by?

Historiography helps you to understand the assumptions behind the conceptual statements made by historians. For instance, many intellectuals were distressed by the inability to secure a peaceful world after the First World War. Disillusioned by war as a means of obtaining any political or diplomatic goal, they reasoned that war itself was often unnecessary and counter-productive. Historians with these assumptions found in the 1850s a "blundering generation" of politicians who were too stupid and petty to avoid the needless tragedy of the Civil War. The Second World War taught a different lesson. Some evils are so monstrous, they stated, that society is justified in suffering great numbers of casualties in order to eradicate the evil. Hitler was such an evil, and slavery was also. The Civil War tragedy of 600,000 dead soldiers, formerly perceived as having died needlessly, became the triumph over a monstrous evil. They did not die in vain. Nothing about the ending of slavery was unnecessary or blundering.

The summaries that follow explain the chronology and assumptions underlying three schools of historiography concerning domestic politics (Progressive, Consensus, and New Left), and three schools of historiography for foreign policies (Nationalist, Realist, and Radical). Be leery of a fatal trap for students: Summarizing a historian's viewpoint in one or two sentences is impossible. Include historiography in your writing if you wish, but don't substitute it for your own analysis. Use historiography to support your arguments. Remember that historians hold varying opinions of the correctness of other historians' ideas. Unless the question directly asks about historiography, make it a minor part of your essay if you use it at all.

Progressive Historiography

Three different schools of historians have emerged in the 20th century. The first, the Progressive school, named for the Progressive reform era, dominated historiography from the early 20th century to the end of the Second World War. Like the writings of most intellectu-

als, the themes of the Progressive historians reflected the issues and concerns of their time. The Progressive movement was a collection of reforms designed to adjust to changes brought on by industrialization and urbanization. A second influence upon these historians was the rise of the social sciences—economics, sociology, psychology, etc.—as separate fields of study. Historians borrowed heavily from these new fields for insights into history, correcting what they saw as the overemphasis on political history. Progressive historians hoped for the social and political betterment of the society of their time, and made no effort to hide their loyalties. They championed liberal, democratic, and progressive ideas and causes. The solution to almost every problem was more democracy, and the way to the golden age was through the secret ballot. The people would prevail because they were the embodiment of goodness. Finally, to the basic assumptions of the Progressive historians add one philosophical characteristic of the era, a belief in progress.

Progressive historians stressed the differences between competing groups, sections, and classes. American society was an arena of competing social and economic forces. First one, then the other gained control in cycles of reform and reaction. The dominant theme was class and sectional conflict. Clearly defined turning points marked the ascension of one group and the defeat of the other. All of the following were used to represent our polarized history: rich vs. poor, interests vs. people, haves vs. have-nots, privileged vs. less privileged, aristocracy vs. democracy, debtors vs. creditors, East vs. South and West, labor vs. big business, Jeffersonianism vs. Hamiltonianism, democracy vs. oligarchy, liberalism vs. conservatism, and agrarianism vs. capitalism.

The central role in American history was played by the frontier or by social forces or by economic forces. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner stressed "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Carl Becker argued that the American Revolution was a question of home rule and who shall rule at home. The colonists revolted from Great Britain and fought among themselves for control of the new American governmental institutions. The Constitution marked the temporary victory of the conservatives over the democrats, temporary in the sense that the struggle was to resurface in American history again and again.

The most famous Progressive historian was Charles Beard. In 1913 Beard shocked conservatives with his *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, which asserted that the Constitution represented the triumph of large property interests over the interests of small farmers. The Constitution that every school child was taught to revere was antidemocratic. No scholarly historical book had ever provoked the debate Beard's did. He carefully worded the title of his book, using "An" rather than "The." He accepted the possibility that he may not have researched and written "The" definitive economic explanation of the origins of the Constitution. Therefore he used "An," allowing "The" for future use. Whatever definitive explanation a future historian would make would be economic. Of that Beard was certain.

Consensus Historiography

After the Second World War a new school emerged of historians who stressed that the shared ideas of Americans were more important in our history than conflicts among them. They believed that Americans possessed a much narrower range of divisive issues and conflicts compared with other peoples of the world. We had had conflicts, but our domestic disputes had never approached the nastiness of European uprisings and revolutions. The bloody reign of terror in the French Revolution had no comparable American counterpart. Patriots battled Tories during the American Revolution, but not with guillotines.

The Consensus historians, or Neoconservatives as they were sometimes called, unabashedly

celebrated the accomplishments and achievements of American democratic capitalism. A key word used to describe them is continuity. They rejected much of the periodicalization of American history, and studied ideas that crossed over the typical political periods. Consensus historians saw in American culture common traits, expressed in the longevity and durability of our institutions. In a world of constantly changing political ideas, governments, and constitutions, they asked, why has our political system endured? Dumb luck? No, features in the American national character have shaped our history, and given it a unique stability and homogeneity. The cement holding us together is our widespread prosperity and universal acceptance of the principles succinctly summarized in the first parts of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Consensus historians believed that American society by the 1950s had achieved an unmatched state of widely dispersed affluence. In short, we had no have-nots, or so few that they were insignificant in our history. Political power had always been widespread because of liberal suffrage laws. Americans fought through the ballot, not to achieve the ballot. As a people we all endorse the same egalitarian fundamentals, they said. Our political struggles have always been within the center rather than between left and right extremists.

Consensus analysis of economic forces ignored the emphasis by Progressive historians upon the role of individuals. For them institutional factors shaped and molded our economy. The Robber Barons became entrepreneurs, innovators in new fields. Men like Rockefeller and Carnegie brought order to the chaos of oil refining and steel production. Their methods may have led to monopoly, but they also led to efficiency. Carnegie, for example, lowered the price of steel from seventy-five dollars a ton to fourteen dollars. What passes for conflict between the haves and have-nots in American history is really competition between competing groups of businessmen or entrepreneurs.

For the Progressive historian the struggle for political power was the struggle for control of the one institution, the federal government, capable of giving one group of entrepreneurs an advantage over another. Raising or lowering the tariff helped or hurt depending upon your economic interests. Approaching from a different level of economic analysis, Consensus historians ignored individuals to concentrate upon the larger economic factors such as the growth of urban markets, the rise of research and development, the rise of the corporate organization, and the rise of advertising.

Much of their political writing directly or indirectly tried to address a perplexing question of American society. Every industrial nation has developed a strong worker, labor, or socialist political party or parties. Why not us? Louis Hartz suggested that American political development took place within the framework of the ideas of European politics but outside their actual conditions. The debates between our liberals and conservatives were really debates among liberals because we had never had the extreme conservatives and leftists of Europe. We don't have deeply felt political issues, he said, because we don't have deep political thought on either end. In this past year, how many evenings did you spend intensely discussing political issues? Constant political discussion sharpens differences, clarifies thinking, and leads to more deeply held convictions. Our political culture doesn't generate truly divisive issues, because we disagree on only minor questions of ends or means, according to Hartz. Daniel Boorstin has suggested that Americans are not an idea-oriented people. The key to understanding American society is pragmatism. We don't think, we do.

Critics disliked several features of Consensus historiography. Their writings perpetuated the myth of American uniqueness that carried with it the implication of superiority. There was little need to study other nations. The history of the United States developed the way it did only because of Americans. In defense of the Consensus historians, consider the impact of both the Second World War and the rise of the Cold War upon intellectuals. Without our superb arsenal of industry we would have never won the Second World War. Thank God for

Rockefeller and Carnegie. Our moral and economic superiority over the communists was a self-evident truth in the 1950s.

In the Consensus view ideas of pragmatism, abundance, and liberalism had a life of their own. They never sprang from, or were associated with, any class struggle or decisive event. The interesting parts of American history were missing. The peaks and valleys of American history were smoothed out by the single-theme emphases.

Finally, if man is not influenced by economic needs and desires, what motivates him? What causes him to join a group to contest the control of the political apparatus? Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform* suggested that concern over rising or declining status, or "status anxieties," lay behind the irrational addiction to Populism, Prohibition, and McCarthyism. Consensus historians borrowed from the social sciences even more than had the Progressives to explain motives. They occasionally selected complex and controversial theories upon which to base their explanations. Many psychologists do not share Hofstadter's faith in borrowed theories of status. Even a lifetime may not be enough to master an academic field such as history. Borrowing from another academic field carries risks, but also may offer unusual insights.

New Left Historiography

Great changes accompanied America's transition into the 1960s. The 1950s had been characterized by a general agreement on national goals, by a secure self-confidence, and by an easy categorization of other nations into good guys and bad guys. In the late 1950s our smug self-assurance dissolved in successive waves of polarization over the issues of racism, imperialism, and poverty. The seeming reemergence of conflict in current events stimulated a re-examination of conflict in American history.

The new champions of the theme of conflict in our history constituted an approach termed the "New Left." The "new" theoretically differentiates them from the unimaginative, Socialist Party orientation of the old left of the 1930s and 1940s. The "left" signifies an orientation towards methods and concepts that focus on the masses and their experiences, "history from the bottom up," as it is called. Unlike the old left, the New Left avoids the preconceived molds of Marxist theories, which distorted the facts to fit a foreign doctrine. The historians of the New Left demand the inclusion of those features of our history that explain how we came to be a violent, racist, repressive society. We don't need imported 19th century theories to find what is discreditable in our history because we have plenty if we don't mince words. We need a "usable past," one that realistically includes all of our bad features. We need to break from the textbook view of American history. Otherwise we can't begin to understand and deal with the poverty, racism, and repression of today.

The renewed emphasis on conflict and polarization was fed by the civil rights struggle. Early New Left historians wrote on the depth of American racism and the pervasiveness of slavery. The rediscovery of poverty and the War on Poverty of Lyndon Johnson's administration both stemmed from the same source, Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, a detailed look at scenes unknown to most middle- and upper-class Americans. Unrest over the draft and the war in Vietnam, impatience with the pace of civil rights, and the examples of political assassinations combined to produce explosions of violence in the cities in the 1960s. The final ingredient convulsing American society was the emergence of the women's movement. Women and minorities destroyed the homogenized image of "consensus" America. The new emphasis was on our pluralism, the existence of many different peoples, ethnic groups, and races. Each aspect of this pluralism deserved representation in our history. We are not a melting pot, but a stew of race, class, gender, and ethnicity.

Diplomatic Historiography: Nationalists

All nations pursue foreign policy objectives consistent with their own self-interest. Foreign policy is normally an offshoot of domestic policies, needs, and goals. You are already familiar with the Nationalist approach, for it is found in almost every textbook. Nationalist historians believe that American foreign policy combines a realistic concept of self-interest with generous support of other nations' goals of democracy, self-determination, and economic prosperity. A commitment to high ideals characterizes a successful foreign policy, a record of which we should be proud.

After the American Revolution Lafayette returned to France with a framed copy of the Declaration of Independence. He placed it off center on a wall. The empty space was reserved for a hoped-for French document granting similar rights. In similar fashion our Declaration of Independence and Constitution have inspired people all over the world and well they should, for these documents epitomize the aspirations of all mankind, not just Americans. Our foreign policy has given expression and substance to these ideas, a record of unselfish idealism unequalled in the history of the world.

We have, admit the Nationalists, made a few mistakes in our foreign policy, such as taking the Philippines and keeping it as a colony. But we rectified our error by generously preparing it for independence and economic stability. We built roads, bridges, schools, etc. Independence came on July 4, 1946, symbolizing the aspiration of all people of the world for self-rule. We may have been an imperialist power, but we were a good imperialist power, prepared from the start for the eventual end of our control.

The assumptions underlying the Nationalist evaluation of American foreign policy were succinctly summarized by a European newspaper during the celebration of the United States bicentennial. The newspaper confessed that although it had often been critical of the United States, what the world needed was more rather than fewer countries like the United States of America.

Diplomatic Historiography: Realists

The Realist school of historical interpretation emerged as a criticism of what it saw as wide swings in 20th century foreign policy. We sought to "make the world safe for democracy" during the First World War. Ten years later we rejected world leadership and withdrew into a cocoon of isolationism. Both extreme swings, say the Realists, were not in our best self-interest. The United States has too often regarded itself as a special nation not bound by the same rules and consequences as others. Our victory in the Spanish-American War was due to God, claimed McKinley and many history books. Realist historians are more apt to accept Bismarck's contemporary analysis, "God watches over fools, drunks, and the United States of America." We were lucky!

Realists criticize both the assumptions behind American foreign policy and the mechanism for conducting it. The American people have mistakenly assumed that much of our history turned out the way it did because we wanted it to. We avoided European wars in the 19th century because we chose to stay out. Actually, none were fought. The long period of peace in our history is abnormal, considering the history of other nations. The safe 19th century and the security of two oceans gave us the erroneous opinion that war was abnormal and peace normal. Therefore, any interruption of peace is due to evil people, nations, or isms.

We don't fight wars; we cleanse the world of evil. For foolish, idealistic, and moral reasons we periodically go on crusades like the knights of old. Our success rate is better than theirs, but the consequences may be worse.

Realists castigate American foreign policy for ignoring the timeless lessons of history. The key element preserving the peace among nations is a balance of power, in which every nation's existence is maintained in a shifting, interlocking stability of conflict and tension. Wars occasionally break out, but they are always limited to a nation's foreign policy objectives, which stem from her self-interests. A nation goes to war to gain territory, protect markets, etc., not just to win. War is not the same as the World Series. The United States, claim the Realists, too often goes to war to win, and forgets objectives consistent with its own self-interest.

One of the great mistakes of war is unconditional surrender. It creates power vacuums and sucks us into future conflicts. Before the Second World War Japan kept order in the Far East. Since the Second World War we have, in Korea, in Vietnam, in Taiwan, and with mammoth military defense budgets. Has Japan suffered from no longer shouldering this burden? Please notice what is missing in this analysis. There are no statements of right and wrong, moral and immoral, good and evil. Realists reject this line of thought. We can't right every wrong, defend everyone, and correct all injustice. So we simply do what is best for us. A chastised Japan would have been better for the U.S. than a defeated Japan.

Our sense of specialness has led us to believe that we are an example to the world. Our political practices, economic prosperity, and eternal ideals place us above the normal fray of shortsighted nations. For example, the Soviet Union speaks for the Soviet Union only; we speak for all mankind. We have been shocked on occasions in the 20th century to discover that some people did not understand how special we are. Stung by criticism, we have withdrawn. This vacillation between intense moralistic crusades and indifferent, self-righteous isolation characterizes our foreign policy. The only way to avoid such swings is to remove the masses and emotion from the decision-making process.

Realists boldly assert that foreign policy is not a matter for public debate. The self-interest goals of any nation clearly establish themselves. The conduct of foreign policy should rest in the hands of professional diplomats who coldly assess the immediate and the long-range consequences of potential policies, and keep in mind the self-interest goals of all the nations involved in a dispute. Realists accept the world as it is and suggest realistic policies. The difficulty for Realists lies in the fact that democracies do occasionally become emotionally aroused. Sometimes the leaders of a government mold public opinion, but sometimes they are moved by it.

Diplomatic Historiography: Radicals

Radical diplomatic historians believe that American foreign policy is controlled by our industrial and economic elite who guide our foreign policies in order to gain new economic markets and resources. In the process the public is manipulated, misled, or propagandized into believing that foreign policy objectives are matters of national rather than corporate or elite concern. The rallying cry of democratic ideals and national security masks the real purpose. The masses fight; the elite gains.

In the 19th century the blood lust for land and resources swept away Mexicans, Indians, and Spaniards. The enlargement of national territory was imperialism, the grabbing of colonies, in disguise. As the 20th century dawned, a new type of imperialism sought to establish economic hegemony over the Caribbean and Latin America. Occasionally U.S. military

might has protected American business adventures abroad. By the middle of the 20th century the United States expanded, and influenced or controlled vast areas of the world for markets and resources. Businessmen do not like instability. Thus, say Radical historians, the economic power elite has enlisted the United States government in its efforts to prevent small nations from controlling their own resources or from keeping these resources to themselves. The United States, claim the Radical historians, is now the opposite of what it was in its beginning. It is now the most antiprogressive and antirevolutionary nation in the world. The Declaration of Independence has been shelved.

What has caused the United States to assume this stance? Foreign policies stem from domestic needs, goals, and images. Radical historians feel primarily that our foreign policies mirror our domestic policies and distract attention from the real issues. What we need is a domestic policy that seeks solutions to the plight of our deprived and disadvantaged classes. We must reduce the power of the elite to provide more for the lower classes. By redistributing income within the United States the domestic economy could absorb the goods produced by our economy for foreign markets, and make much of our imperialism unnecessary.

Radical historians are not Marxists, but they accept the tone and direction of leftist writers. The raw power of the upper classes within American domestic politics is muted, but shines through in the execution of our foreign policy; they say. If you seek the extent to which the power elite will go to enhance or maintain their position, study American foreign policy; it reveals the worst features of the elite control of American society.

As students of history it is important that you understand the difficulties facing Radical historians. To my knowledge no Radical historian has ever found a letter or document written by a member of the power elite establishing a clear relationship between the adoption of a specific foreign policy and the economic objectives of a specific corporation or business. Their case would benefit greatly from a 1940 letter, say, to the stockholders by a major steel corporation urging a flood of letters to their congressmen asking for war in order to increase stock dividends. An old adage among historians is "no documents, no proof, no history." Without documents history writing cannot be supported on the minute, footnote level.

Radicals, however, sense an overall tone and orientation toward American society which is expressed in most of our institutions such as churches, corporations, governments, universities, foundations, etc. It is this larger feel for American society upon which their historical assumptions rest.

Radical historians have been influenced by Lenin's adaptation of Marx's theory of class struggle. Marx postulated a capitalist society in which the capitalists would progressively squeeze the workers through longer hours and lower pay, which would lead to more and more dissatisfaction. Eventually the workers would revolt in a great socialist revolution, end capitalism, and inaugurate socialism. This two-sentence summary of Marx's writings is quite oversimplified! In many ways Marx was a prisoner of his time, the mid 19th century. What he did not foresee was the rise of the middle class, the development of labor unions, and the growth of the welfare state, all of which undermined Marx's prophecy.

Early in the twentieth century, Lenin, who later led the Russian communist revolution, added to Marx's scenario of revolution. Lenin theorized that the capitalists, sensing a rising cauldron of trouble, would try to divert domestic dissatisfaction by pursuing an imperialistic foreign policy in the hope that nationalism would suffocate worker dissatisfaction. Imperialism therefore is not just the greedy thrust of the power elite, but represents the dying gasp of the capitalist class who clutch at straws as they sink lower and lower into the consequences of the mess they themselves created and into a defeat they cannot avoid. To a sincere Marxist capitalist imperialism is an encouraging sign that the capitalist society can no longer sufficiently suppress its own workers. Now you understand why so much communist propaganda criticizing the United States uses the phrase "imperialist."

Hardly any American Radical historian is a Marxist. As a group, however, they do share a belief that American society has been too little concerned with the disadvantaged and too much concerned with an aggressive foreign policy. The key word is aggressive. Firm believers in protecting American society and protecting American interests, they argue that a more peaceful, understanding, and cooperative foreign policy must replace the policies we have historically pursued. Their general criticisms of our foreign policy are clearer than their specific prescriptions for what they would do if they could determine our foreign policy. Only a small number of historians of American foreign policy are Radical historians, but their influence exceeds their number. They force all students of history to think, to defend, to analyze, and to reexamine. Any scholar must understand the arguments of the other side. Understanding the assumptions of Radical historians doesn't make you a radical, just as understanding a football playbook doesn't make you a football player.

Always be alert to the philosophical assumptions an author may have. This short summary of the schools of historiography will help you analyze writings by historians.